



Testimony of Reginald Simmons, Ph.D.

Licensed Psychologist-State of Connecticut

Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Central Connecticut State University

Judiciary Committee

March 11th, 2013

HB No. 6581, A "Second Look" at Lengthy Prison Sentences Imposed on Children

Dear Judiciary Committee:

My name is Reginald Simmons, and I am submitting testimony in support of HB No. 6581, which supports a "second look" at lengthy prison sentences imposed on children. At CCSU, I specialize in juvenile delinquency prevention, and I have nearly twenty years of applied experience working with at-risk youth in community and institutional settings, which includes providing services to juvenile-justice involved youth.

Theories of delinquency developed during the early to mid-twentieth century largely supported the belief that once delinquency formed, it was relatively stable. In essence, troubled youth were largely thought to be "born-criminals". The 1990's saw the advent of research that led to the formation of a developmental perspective of delinquency, which is becoming a prevailing current theory of the origins of delinquency. This perspective stems from results of several longitudinal studies, which studied the lives of children from early-childhood into adolescence or adulthood. One of these developmental theories, called Life-Course Theory, has become well-accepted based on the work of Sampson & Laub among others. Life-Course Theory purports that one's development is dynamic, and is influenced by environmental circumstances. This theory supports the belief that even children who get off to a bad start, can change if they have the will to change and are in an environment that supports desistance from antisocial behavior. In one study, Sampson & Laub analyzed data that was collected on highly-delinquent adolescents from an average age of 14 until they were 32. They found that many of the boys had decreased their offending substantially during adulthood, and some had stopped offending altogether. There were some common characteristics among the boys who desisted from this criminal involvement in adulthood. These boys were more likely to have

developed strong, reinforcing ties to jobs and personal relationships that favor prosocial behavior. This outcome is similar to the research of Rutter, who found that positive adult experiences such as close relationships with others and positive school experiences predicted less likelihood for delinquent youth to continue problem behavior as adults. Sampson & Laub emphasize the importance of individuals who wish to end antisocial behavior removing themselves from the environment that supported the behavior, and finding a new situational context that will support desistance.

In essence, research from the widely-accepted developmental and life-course theories of crime imply that adolescents who do bad things can change if both the individual will and the environment supports the change. I can personally vouch for this view, based on my therapeutic work with delinquent youth. I have personally seen youth and young adults who engaged in law-breaking behavior, at times serious violations, change for the better when both the individual will and the environment supported that change. Moreover, research has substantiated that the adolescent brain, particularly areas having to do with judgement and decision-making, are not fully-developed until early to mid-twenties. Therefore, I am highly-supportive of a second look at youth who have spent multiple years in prison, particularly those who have been involved in rehabilitative programs, have matured in their judgement and decision-making and have acquired coping, educational and/or vocational skills that can support success in the community. If those individuals deemed appropriate for release have the will to change, get involved in reinforcing, supportive activities that are compatible with their talent and interests, secure meaningful employment, and form positive relationships with others who support their recovery, then they have a good chance of doing well in the community. I encourage the adoption of HB 6581, so there can at least be a review of those who may have earned another chance to be a positive contribution to society.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Reginald Simmons". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Reginald Simmons, Ph.D.